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OUR TRAGIC COMICS

BY ELIZABETH ROBINS PENNELL

THE most amiably disposed critic would scarcely call the comics of our daily papers masterpieces of art or humor. But he might deplore them as tragedies if he agrees with the philosopher that men and nations are known by what they laugh at.

That the American, even the American of intelligence and experience, laughs at the comics, must, I think, be taken for granted. Certainly he himself would be the last to deny it. More than one staid citizen has told me that his habit is to open his daily paper at the page recording the latest adventures of Petey and the Gump Family, or the latest progress in the Bringing-up of Father. The habit of the staid citizen when I was young, was to open his daily paper at the page containing the day's news, but this may have been less because he was a superior person than because the printing press was an inferior machine and could not turn out any sort of drawing fast enough for it to turn into a daily necessity. The American then had no objection to humor. As I remember, he rather enjoyed the odd joke that filled up the odd space, he delighted in Max Adeler and Artemus Ward, he could not do without the humorous leader so much in vogue. But with him it was not a question of choice and, apparently, he was still better pleased when modern improvements in the printing press and the editorial policy of giving the people what the people want, made the daily comics possible. Artemus Ward and Max Adeler could not compete today with Father and the Gump Family, and I would not be sure that they could have competed in their own day had there been a Father and a Gump Family for them to compete with.

Nobody would be so foolish as to find fault with the people if the editor is right in thinking that what they want

is to laugh. The Red Indian is said to get through life without so much as a smile. But most other men have wanted to laugh from the very beginning, so much so that when they could not invent something new to laugh at, they clung to the old jokes, shaping them into symbols of laughter—national types—national heroes—who would be always at their beck and call and upon whose every reappearance in song or in art, on the stage or in stories, they could shout with joy, as all right-minded people today shout when the circus clown tumbles into the ring. The mind has not only the faculty, as the philosopher maintains, but an imperative need to create symbols. That is why, almost as soon as there was a mind, Olympus was overpopulated with gods and goddesses, the woods filled to overflowing with dryads, the sea with mermaids, the vineyards with satyrs. But all the symbols in the world would not have satisfied the symbol-maker had not the cap and bells been lurking somewhere near. No doubt Neanderthal man-hunted and the Dordogne cave artist worked, each with a jester at his side. Archæologists and museums give us an idea of what this jester developed into when men grew civilized enough to leave records of their laughter behind them. His Christian successor still leers and grins at us from the capitals and choir stalls of old churches and the pages of early illustrated books, while out of courtesy to tradition, we still chuckle over his wit as he handed it down to the Fools of Shakespeare. It is but yesterday that, as Clown and Pantaloon, he was playing his venerable pranks for us, Harlequin waving the pathetic wand everybody had stopped believing in, Columbine twirling the short skirts the fashions had long out-stripped. Even today he lingers as Pierrot, thanks mostly to the poet and the painter, and as Pulcinello because the Italian Carnival cannot get on without the familiar white figure flitting through the crowd, and as Punch at whom Britons have laughed for such ages it would not be good form not to keep on laughing at him. But these old symbols are pale and faded now. They belonged to a land of leisure where charm no less than wit was exacted of its jesters. They are aliens in a busy practical world. The fool's bells could not be heard above the whirl of machinery. Pierrot's dainty clothes would soon be soiled and stained in the smoke of modern industry.

With the newspaper and cheap printing came the chance for new types more in tune with the new conditions. Pierrot was elbowed out of his job by Joseph Prudhomme; Clown and Pantaloon were forced to resign in favor of Robert Macaire, and laughter lost its irresponsible gaiety in the process. Charm, which it is not the business of the newspaper to cultivate, gave way to satire and now when the people laughed there was bitterness in the laughter for they were laughing at themselves. Beauty was lost, but the satire, when shaped into symbols by artists like Daumier and Monnier, was of the kind that endures, that can be laughed at, even by generations who have outlived its venom. In the first part of the nineteenth century, the caricaturist, the comic draughtsman, made and unmade kings and politicians, lashed the days' follies with ridicule that hurt, exposed relentlessly the frailties and mistakes of weak, blundering humanity, and this he did with such distinction that his drawings will be treasured as long as anything is left of the paper on which they are printed. Prudhomme and Macaire had scores of rivals, scores of successors, so spacious was the new field opened for their fun. Sometimes these types became as national as Uncle Sam and John Bull, sometimes as local as the British Ally Sloper; they were continually cropping up in every land, changed and modified according to time and place and circumstance; the feeble dying off promptly and the strong surviving; always characteristic of the country and the people from whom they sprang; always belonging essentially to their day and reflecting its fads and follies; and, when given life by an artist, living on in his work, as Prudhomme lives in Monnier's, Macaire in Daumier's. Even Ally Sloper, disreputable, vulgar old bounder that he was, is remembered because of the art with which Baxter recorded his exploits and varied his vulgarity.

Once newspapers could print illustrations as readily as text, the field widened immeasurably and the new types increased and multiplied until it was almost impossible to keep pace with them. Then the American, with his genius for invention, evolved the daily comic and for one fool in cap-and-bells, for one Pierrot, for one Macaire, it would be pleasanter to forget the numbers that swarm in the evening paper and the Sunday supplement. But the trouble is, there is no forgetting. The editors are few who

refuse them a place. And, like the movies, the comics are syndicated through the country, and, though I have not yet travelled so far, I am pretty sure that when I do I shall have only to invest in a newspaper to feel as much at home in Portland, Oregon, as Portland, Maine, on the shores of the Great Lakes as among the Lagoons of Florida. In the sense of humor, if in nothing else, East today is West, North is South and in their love of the comics the States are United.

That Americans should want to laugh at something merely shows them to be human. It is the something they want to laugh at that shows what they are besides, and, fortunately for Americans curious to know themselves, the study of the comics is not an over-laborious task. I have found them of a simplicity that a child or a savage could master—so simple that differ as they may, and do, in detail, they can all be reduced to a few first principles as easy to grasp as that two and two make four.

To begin with, the basis upon which the whole scheme is built up is the continued tale. The creators of the comics realize the virtue that lies in the familiar. It requires no unusual gift of vision to see that, if we all keep on laughing at the circus clown, it is not because his tumble is irresistably funny, his "Here we are again!" a triumph of wit, but simply because he is the clown at whom we have always laughed, as our fathers and mothers laughed before us. Andy and Petey, Mutt and Jeff, and the rest of the tribe have been figuring on the same page of the same paper, day by day, for the last two years to my knowledge, and it may be longer, so that already we are as familiar with them as with the old clown who, after all, has the decency to leave discreet intervals between his tumblings. Day by day, moreover, their story is told not in one but in a series of drawings, in the manner that Caran D'Ache, if he did not invent it, carried to perfection in his "Making a Masterpiece," and that Frost used so dramatically in "Our Cat Eats Rat Poison." Caran D'Ache and Frost, however, were artists with a respect for reticence. There is no reticence in the exploitation of these new types, and their story is expanded not in one series, but through daily chapter after daily chapter, in an interminable sequence. That the dullest mind is not proof against the eloquence of repetition, the world did not wait for the modern advertiser

to discover. Mediaeval sinners might have lost their stimulating fear of the devil had not his cloven foot and forked tail threatened them from the sculptures over almost every church door and the paintings on almost every church wall. We would have been on less intimate terms with the characters in Balzac's *Comédie Humaine* and the members of Zola's Rougon-Macquart family had they strayed through fewer volumes. Hamerton used to tell us that only by daily reading of fine verse, or daily listening to fine music, or daily looking at fine pictures, could our love of the beautiful be preserved. The secret of the popularity of Andy and Petey is that, in our daily papers, they are always with us. We have grown accustomed to them. They are as much a part of our daily life as the milkman and the baker, it is as fixed a habit to laugh at them in the evening as to gather in our quart and our loaf in the morning, and we would as soon put up with the unlooked for in the bread or the milk as in their humor.

The very essence of this humor is its reassuring freedom from any artistic or intellectual nonsense. It must give nobody the bother of thinking, it must not soar above the reach of the most sluggish imagination. Indeed, when I watch the American, as he spits on his fingers, turns over the pages of the paper until he comes to his favorite, and studies the comics with unmoved solemnity, I sometimes think the chief essential is that their humor should not trouble him even to relax the muscles of his face into the laugh you can see or hear. Their ideal of fun is grotesque exaggeration of some physical characteristic, preferably to the point of deformity. The heroes of the comics may be tall or short, lean or fat, young or old; their noses may be tip-tilted or drooping; their hair abundant or scant; their mouths a circle or a line; but whatever their chief characteristic of face, form or features, it must be emphasized until it leaps to the eye of the least observant. The living skeleton, the dwarf, the fat lady still have us in thrall; the comic nose, the bald head still work the charm we never fail to succumb to. And humor can go no further than when two of these extremes are rivals in the same series, especially if they are little monstrosities of children playing practical jokes on grown-ups as monstrous in the Sunday supplement's riot of raw, abominable aniline inks called color.

This physical exaggeration or deformity is nothing new

in comic types or caricature. The Maccus of the Romans was not exactly an Apollo. The comic masks of the Japanese are often distorted to a degree that repels the European. The grotesque was an important element of fun in the Middle Ages. Anyone quite like Macaire's faithful Bertrand was never met with out of Daumier's drawings. And probably no joke has been more persistently repeated in every age and every land than the big head on the little body. But this does not mean that exaggeration is a merit in itself. In the old days it took the artist or the wit to carry it off, and still does in some happier parts of the world. But with the American editor who knows what the American people want, it is an article of faith that they do not want to be pestered with either art or wit in their comics and he gives them neither if he can help it. Good drawing creeps in now and then despite him for, strive as he may, the draughtsman will rise occasionally above the editorial level. Some series are the more annoying because of the cleverness of the drawings, others because they were amusing in the first freshness of the artist's fun. But, as a rule, good drawing in the comics is a mere accident. Judged by results, the draughtsman is preferred who cannot draw. Often his vulgarity is worse than his incompetence, often he is feeble to futility, with his performances in color he sinks to the lowest depths. One asks in dismay what is the use of art schools all over the country, of art lectures and art clubs, of docents in the museums, and critics in the press, of endless chatter about art and bringing it to the people, if the people's eyes are to be debauched and diseased weekly, if not daily, by these raw, crude, discordant washes and messes of the cheapest colored ink.

Nor is humor in the subject apt to redeem its absence in the drawing. The comics cling to the hen-pecked husband, the wrangling wife, the meddling mother-in-law as high-water marks of our inextinguishable laughter. To pull a chair from under the unsuspecting, to tickle the sleeper, to knock off somebody's hat, to stagger with drink have not ceased to be matters of infinite jest. On other pages of the paper, woman may figure as a St. Theresa, a Joan of Arc, a Florence Nightingale, whose mission is to save and "uplift" the world; in the pages of the comics she is not yet emancipated from slavery to a spring hat or a bit of fluff, she has not yet given up her old trick of

wheedling money for it out of her husband's or her father's pocket. On other pages man may be engrossed with more serious problems than he has ever before had to face; on the page of the comics his business is to cheat and be caught at it, to drink and be the worse for it, to fight and be knocked over in it, when he is not at his old trick of keeping his wife's or his daughter's hand out of his pocket. These jests were never of a high order, they were long since squeezed dry, they are the more unendurable today because of the boast we make of our higher standards.

Wit is as far to seek in the new treatment of the old motives, in the modern expression of the traditional emotion. The white face of Pierrot was full of subtlety. Daumier watched the men and women about him until he knew humanity by heart, in its every phase and possibility. Each one of Keene's "cabbies" and "drunks" had a character of his own. But the modern comic draughtsman reduces all human emotion and its expression to a formula that could not disconcert a kindergarten. A black hole for the mouth and a tumble backward with feet in air serve him indiscriminately for fear or astonishment, delight or disappointment, fun or fury. A kick or a blow meets every situation as magically as the wave of Harlequin's wand, or the twirl of Columbine's skirts. He has but to add a hint of surroundings and accessories, of the passing of seasons and fashions, and his task is done. As seldom does wit in the legend atone for primitiveness in the drawing. It used to be said that the drawings in *Punch*, with the exception of Keene's were funny only in the legend. But the comics do not stoop to so small a concession. The legend may simply re-echo the day's slang, beginning with an "O Boy!" and ending with an "Ain't it a grand and glorious feeling?" it may yield no rarer gems than such impossible and detestable English as "Doncha know" and "I gotta go," and it is hailed by rapture as empty and inane as itself. There are times when a good strong Rabelaisian roar over a downright Rabelaisian joke would seem as healthy a relief as a cool wind let into an unaired room. But we shrink from Rabelaisianism, while a vein of worse, indecent suggestiveness is permeating the whole country.

Altogether, the more seriously the comics are considered, the less deserving of serious thought they are found to be in themselves. It is the hold they have taken on the

public that gives them importance. They have become as characteristic a part of American life as the movies and the sodawater fountain. The names of their heroes are household words, the adventures they record are as eagerly looked for as the news of the world, the feeble jokes they get off are in everybody's mouth, their authors scarcely lag behind Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford in the race for millions. Unquestionably, if the comics may not have been originally what the people wanted, they have become what the people want today, and, appetite having a disconcerting way of growing by what it feeds on, the more the people get of them, the less able will the people be to do without them. To the public whom he amused, the mediæval fool appealed not only by his humor but by the beauty with which he played his part in the carver's decoration and the poet's verse. To the later generations who rejoiced in Macaire, romantic vagabond, splendid in his swagger, or in Joseph Prudhomme, smug in his bourgeois virtues, half the pleasure was in the wit that made them think. It was left to the comics to do without beauty or wit. Neither has a place in their daily page. People laugh at the new symbols of humor precisely as they laugh at the man who slips on the ice or at the crude false face of the toy shop—that is, without thought. If they paused to think they probably would not laugh at the slip knowing it was painful, or at the false face knowing it to be silly. But the laugh comes before there is time to think because it is in response to a primitive instinct we have not outgrown;—the comics, however, see to it that thought cannot interfere with the laughter they excite, for they provide nothing to think about. They have foresworn satire as well as wit and beauty. They could hurt nobody, so feeble are their most daring sallies. They could have no more influence on the affairs of the day than the antics of the monkees at the zoo. Kings might flourish or fall, Republics might rise or crumble, Bolshevism might have us by the throat, and the comics could not be held to blame or to praise by their most ardent admirer or severest critic. If they reflect anything of the moment it must be a want of thought that should alarm us. If they are characteristic of the country, as a country's humor has hitherto been supposed to be, then it is time for us to put on sackcloth and sprinkle our heads with ashes, for a country known by the

laugh that greets the comics must be on the verge of senility or a relapse into barbarism.

The result then of any study of the comics is to bring us face to face with the unpleasant fact that in our sense of humor we have gone back to its lowest, most primitive form. To this extremity has his "conquering laugh" reduced the "laughing animal." If in Matthew Arnold's opinion the American funny man of his generation was a national calamity, I shudder to think what the comics would have seemed had he lived to see them—what his word for them would have been when even a travelling Parsee can revile them as an atrocity. It may, it probably will be said that I am thrusting upon the comics an importance that does not belong to them, that they are for the people, and that the people would not understand a higher form of humor,—the "people" when dragged in after this fashion, always meaning the multitude. But this is the sort of argument that invariably meets the bold man—or the bold woman—who ventures to detect deterioration or menace in any feature of our national life. It implies a lack of loyalty, a falling away from democratic grace, to criticize the silly sentiment and wholesale ineptitude in our theater, which is patronized by the people and must therefore be adapted to their intelligence; or to object to the banality and vulgarity of our movies, since the movies cater for the people; or to recall with regret the illustrated magazines of twenty years or so ago because now—nobody yet has helped me to understand why—good illustration would fail to please the people; or, in a word, to be so ill-advised as not to swallow whole every standard set up by or for the people since they, in a democracy like ours, rule. Besides, theaters, movies, magazines, papers would not pay if they were not run for the people—though that the world might be better off if they did not pay is at least open to discussion, while the fact that the people have never been consulted is ignored. Anyway, it is treason to detect a flaw in God's country, especially as with education the change will come. When the schools, colleges and universities scattered from end to end of our vast Republic have done their work, the millennium will be with us and the comics will be transformed into things of beauty, joys forever.

But this is no argument, no explanation at all. What is apt to be forgotten today is that the standard of the peo-

ple in these matters has always been higher when they were not educated, when their taste was formed by tradition, when nobody bothered about what they wanted and they shared in the beauty with which most men were satisfied until, upon the coming of the cheap and nasty, most men revealed their real preference. Moreover, education is a boon that has never hitherto been denied to the American. On the contrary, he has been educated for the last hundred and fifty years and more. He is what education has made him; his theaters, movies, magazines and papers are the outcome of his educated taste. It is despite all that education has not done for him, that the optimist continues to look upon it as the one universal panacea, though the man who is not afflicted with optimism long since lost faith and wonders, with Henry Adams, that education does not ruin everybody concerned in it, teachers as well as taught. I can understand Frederick Harrison's confession that he is "against all education."

The truth we shrink from admitting is that only the few have ever cared for the things that education gives us. In the days when education was for the few, the few set the standard, which the many, in their indifference, accepted without a murmur. But today it is not democratic form to defer to the few in any question, even of taste, nor does democratic mean quite what it used to. The old-fashioned idea of democracy was that each man should be free to take advantage of his opportunities, whether he made more out of them than anybody else or not. The new-fashioned idea of democracy is that no man shall be free to get more out of his opportunities than anybody else, whether or no the strong are sacrificed in this struggle for equality. We are to be standardized, cast in the same mould, we are to have our feet neatly turned in the one path in which we all must go—no possibility left for what Wells calls "the adventure of mankind." The lowest intellect must be respected, for the rich in mind have no more right to a larger share of the world's treasures than the rich in pocket. Under any circumstances, nothing is rarer than the man who thinks, as Anatole France's revolting angels learned to their surprise. The man who thinks today must keep it to himself out of deference to the many who do not. Thought, like labor, must seek the lowest level that injustice may be done to none. Better do without all adven-

ture for mankind than let the intelligence and imagination it calls for become the monopoly of any one favored class or individual.

With the logic of this policy the comics are in strict accord. At a time when the efficient workman should turn out no more work than the inefficient, when the man who drinks wisely must not drink at all because the weakling drinks foolishly, it is only reasonable that nobody should laugh unless the feeblest minded can laugh with him. Inequality in our sense of humor would be a danger to democracy. The marvel is that there should be any man or woman of intelligence who does not see in this forcing down to the lowest level a demoralizing influence, a threat to the virility and independence of the race willing to accept it. It is because the comics play a leading part in the general demoralization and, as a reflection of our sense of humor, are a part of it, that they give a greater cause for tears than laughter. They make not for comedy, but for tragedy, the legitimate, inevitable expression as they are, of one of the most enfeebling fallacies of the day.

ELIZABETH ROBINS PENNELL.